

Connecting with the *Whole Body*

Call to Worship: Psalm 133

Hymn #281- *For All the Saints*

1st Scripture: Philippians 4

Hymn #280- *I Love Thy Kingdom Lord*

2nd Scripture: Romans 16:1-16

Hymn #285- *Blest Be the Tie That Binds*

Introduction:

Unity of mind and heart are, of course, two of the very basic essential characteristics of a healthy church. To say that Christ and His Apostles have placed a great emphasis on Christian unity is actually an understatement. Both have marked the unity and love of the brethren as paramount to both the life and survival of the church. In His High Priestly prayer, found in John 17, our Lord links the “Oneness” of the church to the very effectiveness of her Christian witness. The world will not believe that Christ was sent by the Father, if the church is divided. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul, following three very powerful and encouraging chapters regarding all of the incomprehensible blessings given us in Christ, begins his list of relevant imperatives (or commands) with these foundational words, “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Unity is critical to the Christian witness, and it is critical to the life and survival of any church.

And when we consider that Christ identifies His church as His *Body*, composed of many different, but equally important parts, we can understand why this unity is so significant. The body analogy says it all, doesn't it? In order for a body to function according to its intended use, the brain and the heart, the arms and the legs, the lungs and the kidneys...in short, all of the parts must work effectively together, with each part putting forth its proper share. It must remain connected and work in unison, if anything is going to be accomplished. And in the case of the church, Jesus is the Head, and we as the body, are called to coordinate with the will and desire of the Head. It is the mind of Christ that is to guide and direct the will and life of the body. [Baseball player analogy- eyes watching the pitch, left hand down, right hand up, elbows bent,

knees bent, left foot steps into pitch, right foot stays planted, legs and feet cooperate to run, while arms swing and help maintain balance...etc. Imagine chaos and lack of order here!] (1)

Now, at the most basic level of loving one another and maintaining Gospel unity in Christ, is the need to communicate with and know one another. Now this seems quite obvious, but brethren, if we are honest, our flesh is far more comfortable with relating to people we know well, than it is with breaking the ice anew, and getting to know those whom we don't know so well in the body. In other words, our natural inclination is to form comfortable cliques even within the church. Our society, in fact, fosters this kind of a mindset, but we must combat it, and see it for what it is, unhealthy and unbiblical. Now, this does not mean that we will not generally have close friends out of the whole (even our Lord had His inner circle disciples), but it does mean that we have to consciously move out of our comfort zone and into the realm of getting to know and greet everyone in the Body. In the church setting, where we are part of the same body, we have to consciously avoid and overcome our comfortableness with what I call the "shopping mall" mentality (hundreds of people just walk by each other with no acknowledgement and hardly even a look, because everyone is set on their own self-serving mission).

Now, I want you to notice something very significant that is found in a number of the Epistles of the New Testament Scriptures. As you know, the Epistles are divinely inspired *letters* written to various churches. And when writing or reading letters, you would expect various greetings and commendations and such, but the Apostle Paul says some things that would seem quite unusual for a letter, which I believe to be very relevant for our present topic. Listen to several short statements found at the closing of some of the Epistles.

1) 1 Corinthians 16:19-23- "The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* The salutation with my own hand--Paul's. If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

2) 2 Corinthians 13:11-14- "Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. *Greet*

one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.” (2)

3) 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28- “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. Brethren, pray for us. *Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.* I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.”

4) Philippians 4:19-23- “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. *Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.* The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”

5) 1 Peter 5:12-14- “By Silvanus, our faithful brother as I consider him, I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God in which you stand. She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son. *Greet one another with a kiss of love.* Peace to you all who are in Christ Jesus. Amen”

6) Romans 16:16- “*Greet one another with a holy kiss.* The churches of Christ greet you.”

I. “Greet One Another with a Holy Kiss”

All of these texts have one very significant thing in common, namely, the charge to “greet one another in the body.” Now, this seems a bit awkward upon first glance, because why would the apostles command the members of the local churches to greet one another, and in five of these cases, “with a holy kiss?” Let me ask you, have you ever written a letter to someone, asking them to greet others in their family, not on your behalf, but on their own behalf? It is natural to extend your own greeting, but to call others to greet one another, seems a bit unusual, unless there is a very significant and relevant, divine purpose in mind, which clearly, there is here, as is the case with all of Scripture. (3)

You see, brethren, the apostles know very well the importance of consciously bringing our focus outward, calling us to greet one another, as a means of continually opening and making good use of the communicative lines of fellowship. How can we love one another (intelligently), if we do not regularly communicate with one another through the doorway of greeting and welcoming? How can we maintain unity and deal with personal sins and offenses, if we don't make good use of the lines of communication, which begin with a heartfelt greeting? Recognizing one another, wishing each other well and greeting one another in love, is the open door to every other means of fellowship. And the Apostle commands this, not because he is trying to treat us like infant children, but because he knows very well that within our fallen human nature, we have a difficult time breaking the ice in connecting with one another as brethren, and as a part of the same body. He knows very well that we are naturally "cliquish," finding it very difficult to walk in the direction of those whom we do not know "all that well." And so, the gracious command; the command springing out of our Gospel hope in Christ, compels us to travel beyond our comfort zone, consciously seeking to connect with *all* the brethren, regularly. Now brethren, again, this does not assume that we are all going to foster tight nit, "bestest" friend relationships with 140+ members in the body. That is just not possible for most of us. But it does mean that we are proactively seeking to extend our fellowship outreach beyond the comfort zone of those whom we know well, and into the territory of those whom we know very little.

In the text we read in 1 Thessalonians, we are given the general principle that is assumed in all of the rest of the texts we have read, "Greet *all* the brethren with a holy Kiss." We are called to "Greet *all*" not only *some* (or even *many*) of the brethren. And we are to do so with a "holy kiss." Now granted, in our culture it is very difficult to get past the assumptions that are made when men kiss other men, but in the culture of first century Israel, like the French today (and like men do with women in our country), everyone kissed everyone else on the cheek. Now regardless of whether or not you are comfortable with doing that, the principle remains the same. There is a particular greeting that you can give a brother/sister in Christ that you could *never* give an unbeliever, namely, a *holy* greeting. You see, a *holy* greeting is a greeting that takes us beyond this world and into the eternal fellowship we have in Christ. It is a family greeting, *not* a family greeting connected to our temporal, earthly families, but a family greeting that represents the love, unity and fellowship that we forever have in Christ. It is a greeting that any Christian

can give to another Christian, even if they have just met for the first time, because in Christ, they have already met their union upon their conversion. It is a greeting shared by sanctified, set apart, elect children of God, who have been chosen from before time and called out into the same family, in time. It is a *holy* greeting! And the “kiss” just adds the physical, familial affection to this greeting. And what makes this greeting so powerful, is that it constantly forces us to bring our hearts beyond the petty differences that we face in our travels toward glory together, and into the realm of the Gospel, where all of those differences are exposed as shallow and trivial, in the face of Jesus Christ, to whom we all belong! It is a Gospel greeting, and a declaration of our familial connection, fellowship and glory in Christ! And so, the Apostle calls us to “greet one another with a holy kiss.” When you come together as a body, make it your conscious duty to encounter and greet your brethren, in this way, especially those who do not know you well. And this will bring arm and hand, leg and foot, heart and lungs, ankle and shin, muscle and vein together!

(4 ½)

II. Bringing it Home for Us

Every year, brethren, on the first Sunday of the year, I especially try to address matters that seem to be very relevant to the life of our church. And I think Pastor Doug and I can both say that one of the most common complaints we have heard from the body is that there is a lack of “reaching out to all” among the brethren. That is to say that people tend to meld into their own comfortable cliques, while neglecting to get to know and interact with all who are in the body. Now, let me say what I have often said in response to these concerns. Knowing my own heart, and how prone, by nature, I can be to this type of neglect, I don’t believe that this problem, for the most part, involves any form of malice or intentional neglect. In other words, I don’t think most of us form such cliques with the intent of intentionally excluding those who we “just don’t like.” Now, sadly, it can come off that way, but I don’t believe that that is what is in the heart. It may be for some, but probably not for the great majority.

I believe that the heart of this problem rests in our natural fear of man and in our fleshly struggle with moving out of our comfort zones. [Illustration: two people are on opposite sides of the room. One I know well, one I don’t. My body, almost unconsciously is going to move

toward the one I know well. I don't want to greet someone I don't know and risk having to direct a conversation that may not go very far. If I don't know much about you, I have very little to start with or build on, and so there is discomfort there and a fear of getting stuck in a speechless vacuum. And so, it is very easy for me to walk right past the one person and to nest myself comfortably at the side of the other]. (5)

[Consider as well, the example of visitors, sitting alone at a luncheon or in the middle or corner of the fellowship hall with a cup of coffee---will they come back?; I have experienced this elsewhere also, but I am not offended because I am well aware of the struggle...let us keep this in mind at all times, before judging hearts]

Yet, the command is clear, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." And while the command ought to suffice for motivating us unto this task, let me leave you with two other practical motivations, which I believe can help mature us as a church in this regard:

1) Brethren, what is it that enables us to break through the walls of discomfort, so that we can speak with and love our fellow brethren in Christ? Is it not Christ Himself? The Gospel is what brings us out of ourselves, out of our own comfort zones and into the lives of others. We recognize and rejoice in all that our holy Christ has done to penetrate our world of sin and rebellion on our behalf, and we follow with our own crosses. The joy of who we are in Christ, of what we have in Christ, of who Christ is to us, and of what our relationship to one another is in Christ, drives us out of ourselves with a sense of boldness, into the lives of every other person who names the Name of Christ, especially the brethren of our local church body! Christ calls us to generate our love for Him, in the direction of one another. "Peter, do you love Me?" "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." "Feed My sheep!"

Brethren, look around; these are a small portion of the remnant, who will be spending eternity with you in glory. Look around; are you familiar with all of these precious sheep? Work together now! Know and love each other now! Serve each other now! Connect as fellow members of one body now, unto the glory of your blessed Savior!

Christ tears down the wall of discomfort and gives you every ounce of boldness you need to greet, love and serve one another! Christ gives you all that you need to extend your sincere interests beyond the inner circle and into the outer perimeter of the church body. Through

Christ, the hand not only connects and works with the wrist, but it connects and works with the foot and the lower spine and the abdomen as well! Christ breaks down the “fear of man!” (6)

And the good news is that Christ gives us all the common ground that we need to enter into fellowship with one another! We share the same Gospel privileges, do we not? We drink of the same Word and love the same Christ, do we not? We all have a testimony concerning how Christ has taken hold of our souls in grace, do we not? So, we may hit some bumps and lulls in our conversations, but let’s step out in faith, with what we do know, and trust God to meet us there. There is nothing to be afraid of. No one is laughing or mocking here. We share the same fallen nature and human weaknesses. “Greet one another with a holy kiss!”

You say, “Well, our personalities are so different...we could never get along...etc.” Nonsense! You do not have to live together. But the culture of Christ is what brings every different key of the piano together, doesn’t it? Just maybe, the difficulty you are having with “so-and-so” is for your own sanctification, so you can learn to love and serve all, as Christ has?

2) A good way to break the ice is to be here as much as possible. Come to the fellowship events and stated meetings. Be here and get to know people. That is often how relationships are formed and cultivated. [If you come once a week, and run right out after the service, you will never foster relationships with your brethren.] [Example: How people meet during “moving” events]

Conclusion:

Brethren, for the love and unity of the church; for the glory of Christ, let’s all make a conscious and concerted effort to love and greet one another regularly this year. Let’s especially look out for those who do not know us too well. Let us look out for the visitor as well. Let’s start today! Right after the service, we are having a “New Year” fellowship. What better opportunity to put these principles to work, then to do so today, by “Greeting one another with a holy kiss!” And in doing so, we will build and develop a better accountability *with* and tolerance and love *for* one another. And in doing so, we will function as a “well ordered” body. For the year 2012, let us not be accused of being “cliquish” or “stand-offish” by anyone. Let us be

known as the most welcoming, friendly, church in the world. Let people see us as a blessed family in grace!

The Gospel

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21

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